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ABSTRACT

An overview of Kohlberg's theory of moral development is presented; three interviews regarding the theory are reported, and the author's own moral development is compared to the model; finally, a critique of the theory is addressed along with recommendations for future enhancement. Lawrence Kohlberg's model of moral development, also referred to as moral reasoning theory, is outlined. Three phases of moral development are listed with the six stages and their developmental significance. In order to validate or invalidate the Kohlbergian theory of moral development, the author surveyed three individuals whose demographics span the spectrum of gender, race, socioeconomic status, and life experiences. Interviewees were asked to place statements derived from the theory in order and provide examples of their own moral development. They also responded to several additional questions. A synopsis of each interview is presented. Findings suggest that there is definitely a launching point for moral reasoning, but the progression is not always linear or uniform. Additional findings and future directions are discussed. The interview questions are appended. (EMK)

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Kohlberg's Moral Development Model: Cohort Influences on Validity

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Kohlbergian theory of moral development by first, providing an overview of the theory; second, validating or invalidating the model based on a sample survey; and last, comparing the model to the author's own moral development.

Introduction

"The dilemma deals with Helga, a Christian girl in Nazi Germany during the Second World War. Helga's Jewish friend Rachel shows up at her door with the information that the Gestapo has arrested her family. Rachel now needs help from Helga. The dilemma, of course, is what is Helga to do?" (Kirman, 1991, p. 33).

This example illustrates a dilemma proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg to measure an individual's moral development. Moral development is based on the moral action of the individual. Moral action is defined as "that which is consistent with the subject's own judgment about the action" (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 518) and an action is moral "in reference to objective and universal standards as well as to the individual's own moral judgment" (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 519). These views align, respectively, with teleological or deontological beliefs that Kohlberg feels develop in stages similar to that of Jean Piaget's cognitive development model: "Like Piaget, I assumed that the child's active moral constructions, as distinct from passively learned assertions of adult moral cliches would center on the child's sense of justice ... I assumed that the developing child was a philosopher, constructing meanings around universal categories or questions such as the question of fairness"(Kohlberg, 1984 p. xvii).

The purpose of this paper is to further examine the Kohlbergian theory of moral development. This is accomplished by first providing an overview of Kohlberg's moral development stage theory. Second, the theory is applied to three interviewees to determine its degree of validity. Next, the theory is imposed on this author to further ascertain the truth or relevance of the Kohlbergian doctrine. Finally, my critique of the theory is addressed along with recommendations for future enhancement.

Overview of Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

As previously stated, Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, also referred to as moral reasoning theory, is founded on Piagetian conception of cognitive stages related to maturation. Additionally, Kohlberg's "philosophic conception of moral judgment has been based on principles of justice and has depended upon the theories of Kant and of Rawls" (Kohlberg, 1984, p 401). Specifically, moral development depicts the child as one who "actively interacts with and thinks about the moral content to which he is exposed." (Swanson, 1995, p. 299). A developmental change is thought to be motivated by a process called disequilibrium (Swanson,1995). The individual's "conceptualization of the nature of

justice" (Swanson, 1995, p. 299) is therefore, recognizable and comparable to structural stage models. Moral development is seen as hierarchical growth where one moves from the nadir to zenith of morality and moral actions.

Kohlberg's Model

Kohlberg assigns an individual's "stage of moral maturity" (Weber, 1993, p. 439) in accordance with "the reasons given why certain actions are perceived as morally just or preferred" and, not just the person's action (Weber, 1993, p. 439). From this reasoning and Kohlberg's research, it becomes evident that there exists significant age and stage related differences per both moral judgment and action (Weber, 1993). These stages and their developmental significance are outlined below (Swanson, 1995; Weber, 1993):

> Phase 1: Pre-Conventional
> Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment Orientation: Physical consequences of action determine goodness or badness; an avoidance of punishment and unquestioning deference to power are valued.
> Stage 2: Naively Egoistic Orientation or the Instrumental Relativist Orientation: Right action is that which instrumentally satisfies the self's needs and occasionally others.
> Phase 2: Conventional
> Stage 3: Good Boy, Nice Girl Orientation: Good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them; conformity to stereotypical images of what is majority or 'natural' behavior is a common guide.
> Stage 4: Law and Order Orientation or the Authority and Social Order Maintaining Orientation: Orientation toward showing respect for authority and maintaining the given social order for his own sake. From the perspective of a generalized member of society, reasoning relies upon a conception of the social system as a consistent set of codes and procedures that apply impartially to all members in a society.
> Phase 3 Post-Conventional
> Stage 5: Social-Contract Legalistic Orientation: Right is a matter of personal values and opinion, resulting in an emphasis upon the possibility of changing based upon rational considerations of social utility. Duty is defined in terms of contract, general avoidance of violation of the will or rights of others, and majority will and welfare.
> Stage 6: Universal Ethical Principle Orientation or Conscience or Principled Orientation: Right is defined by decisions of conscience, in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency.

Furthermore, Kohlberg (1984) reports "adult development is primarily a matter of stabilization, a dropping out of childish modes of thought rather than the formation of new or higher modes of thought" and "little development occurs after the early twenties." (p. 429). Relatedly, Kohlberg views Stage 6 as not being attained often: "my position on the Stage 6 justice procedure is that in the 'moral musical chairs' activity of prescriptive role-taking one can only proceed so far intellectually" (p. 386).

Kohlberg's theory is most often criticized on its alleged comprehensiveness and gender bias (Swanson, 1995; Weber, 1993). However, Kohlberg refutes his critics by replicating studies, which account for perceived study shortcomings, and producing similar outcomes (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; Modgil & Modgil, 1986; Kohlberg, 1984). The following analysis is an application of Kohlberg's moral development theory on three individuals.

Interviews

In order to validate or invalidate the Kohlbergian theory of moral development, the author surveyed three individuals whose demographics span the spectrum of gender, race, socioeconomic status, and life experiences. Below is a synopsis of each interview (see Appendix for interview format), along with the thoughts of the interviewees in reference to their own moral development. For purposes of confidentiality, interviewees are referred to by sequence number or by their initials.

Interviewee #1 L. H.

L. H. is a 32-year-old divorced African American male. He is a 10-year Army veteran who is currently stationed in Caracas, Venezuela. L. H. was raised in suburban Maryland. His parents divorced when he was six years old and L. H. lived with his mother and two younger sisters until he was 12 years old. At that time, L. H. moved in with his father. He was reared in the Catholic faith and still practices Catholicism. L. H. is a graduate of the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point and has recently graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with a Master's degree in Latin American studies.

In review of the Kohlbergian model, L. H. noted that his moral development did not follow a linear progression, rather his development was more "circular." For example, he stated that the foundation of his development started with his mother focusing on the good boy orientation of right and wrong. Then, an abrupt change in this groundwork was marked when he moved in with his "authoritarian" father, who, only operated with the "punishment and obedience" orientation with moral correctness being periphery. L. H. pronounced that "do what I say, not what I do" was a big part of his model for moral development. L. H. did not feel as though he experienced the instrumental relativist orientation but claimed that from the time he entered USMA, he started operating in a law and order orientation. Finally, he said that he saw

himself moving between all levels in Kohlberg's model and some levels that were not identified by Kohlberg.

Interviewee #2 C. P.

C. P. is a 53 year old Caucasian female. She was raised on a farm in rural New York with her parents, one older sister, and a younger sister and brother. When she was 16 years old, her father was killed in a car accident and one-month later her mother died of cancer. The children were split up and sent to live with family friends and relatives. C. P. graduated from nursing school as a registered nurse and has been in the field for the past 33 years. C. P. was married to an abusive man for 19 years, with whom she had two children. She divorced this man and is currently remarried.

Unlike interviewee #1, C. P. viewed her moral development as linear, but not corresponding entirely to Kohlberg's model. C. P.'s earliest memory, and foundation for her moral development, was the "whipping" she would get if she did not do her chores. Her development then progressed to the instrumental relativist orientation where sharing was in her ability, but not something she was necessarily interested in doing. C. P. recalled the movement to the good girl orientation by remarking that her mother "praised" her for doing what was right. C. P., who declared that she moved into the universal ethical principle at the time of her parents' deaths, noted a deviation from Kohlberg's hierarchical representation. She stated "my conscience and the Protestant beliefs in universal rights and wrongs became very clear." At 44 years old, C. P. depicted a shift to the stages of social contract legalistic orientation and the law and order orientation. She said that she not only was guided by the stage 6 principles, but also started relying more on the stage 4 and 5 principles – "they became more important in my daily functioning as I grew older." Thus, C. P. characterized her development as linear, but not following Kohlberg's model "to the letter."

Interviewee #3 A. V.

A. V. is a 34 year old Caucasian male. His parents divorced when he was nine years old. He lived intermittently between California and Virginia with both his mother, his father, and their respective blended families. A. V. was a high-school dropout and a substance abuser. At 18 years old, he decided to enlist in the Army to "straighten out." While in the Army, he received his graduate equivalency diploma (GED),

achieved the rank of sergeant, and was selected to go USMA. A. V. graduated from USMA and has been in the Army for 14 years. He is currently married and is attending graduate school.

Like interviewee #2, A. V. saw his development as having progressed linearly, although he noted deviation from the stages of Kohlberg's model. A. V. outlined his development as fitting into four stages: Stage 1: good boy orientation; " as a little boy, adults around me addressed my behavior in terms of good boys do or do not do X;" Stage 2 social contract legalistic orientation: "As a teenager, I rationalized that doing drugs was okay based on the changing definitions of legality;" Stage 3 law and order orientation: "Issues of right and wrong became clear when I was at USMA. I witnessed a cadet get thrown out for an honor code violation. There was a universalizing system of what was right and wrong and that was non-negotiable;" and Stage 4 universal ethical principle orientation: "the Catholic church teachings provided me with a metaphysical sense of what comprises morality – that my belief in the church and what is moral is derived from God." In addition, he believed that his development was more internally based versus externally based – "even as a little kid, my parents and other adults never influenced my moral development beyond the shame factor associated with the 'good boys don't do that.'"

Interview Summary

In reviewing these interviews, the consensus is that there is a definite launching point for moral reasoning, but the progression is not always linear or uniform. Deontology and teleology were sometimes paradoxically conflated. Development did occur similarly in terms of relative experiences – each of the interviewees experienced the good boy, good girl orientation, but not always at the same sequencing. Likewise, institutional influence of development was highlighted either in terms of USMA or church. What does this say about Kohlberg's model? I believe the results of these interviews validate some aspects of Kohlberg's work while invalidating other aspects of it.

Author's Moral Development

In thinking back on my moral development, there are two things that stand out. First, I never experienced right or wrong in terms of punishment or obedience or the good girl orientation. I was taught to view right or wrong in terms of logical consequences of my actions. For example, when I was seven years old I stole a piece of candy from the grocery store. As a consequence of my behavior I had to return

the candy, apologize, and offer some form of reparation. I understood this not as punishment, but as following logically from what I had done.

The second thing that stands out is my experience with moral decision-making since being in the military. The military institution's emphasis on ethics is not universally applied or incorporated at all levels of command. There is a dichotomy among soldiers' levels of moral development. Whereas I can examine a rule or regulation and enforce it, others cannot. The issue is interpretation rooted in differences of individual moral upbringing. This, to me, illustrates the chaos incumbent on any stage model of moral development. While I see my own development as somewhat linearly formed, I do not see it meshing with Kohlberg's model for a number of reasons.

I believe that Kohlberg's model is brilliant, however, I think it is founded on the modal model family of the 1950s. In this family, logical parenting tasks correlated to form a pattern of moral development easily translated into Kohlbergain terms. I would predict the cohort of Generation Xers' moral development is less similar to Kohlberg's model than the moral development of the Babyboomer Generation. This prediction is certainly proven in comparing my own moral development with the development of those I interviewed.

Finally, I think my own development validates one primary aspect of Kohlberg's model - its linear construction. However, my overall individual moral developmental tasks invalidate the ideological components of Kohlberg's stages. My moral development progresses through context-specific stages related to my personal upbringing. This includes my culture, my phenomenology, my will, and other ecologically based systems.

Conclusion

In sum, the purpose of this paper is to examine the Kohlbergian theory of moral development. This was accomplished by first looking at the foundation and fundamentals of Kohlberg's model. Next, interviewees deconstructed the model in terms of validating or invalidating stage concepts, sequencing, or both. Finally, as the author, I gave the reader my "take" on Kohlberg's model relative to my own development.

In projecting this theory onto my future client caseload – cadets and other Army personnel – I believe the model serves as an excellent foundation for understanding moral development. Awareness

gained from the interviewees, reference USMA's honor code, reinforces the knowledge that stages 4, 5, and 6 of Kohlberg's model are being utilized. Also, knowing that an individual's moral development does not always progress linearly, can be advantageous in delving into phenomenology, as well as ethically indoctrinating cadets and other military personnel.

As previously stated, I think this model translates best for certain generations with traditional family structures. With the status of current family structures in flux, I think there is a need to re-establish and re-verify the concept of moral development as stage, or hierarchically, related. I also wonder about the validity of Kirman's (1991) critique of Kohlberg's model: "Kohlberg's theory is not so much morality that is being examined, as is the sophistication of rationalizing one's actions" (p. 33). Moreover, Kohlberg's "social interactionist view of human functioning" (Hayes, 1994, p. 261) may not fully integrate the wide range of ecological systems that influence an individual's moral development. Research taking an ecological perspective might be influential in updating a groundbreaking theoretical contribution.

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Appendix

Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory

Survey: The following survey is provided to determine the focus of your moral development. Please provide demographic information (age, number of people in family of origin, employment, ethnicity, etc.) in addition to answering the survey questions.

Questions:

1. Please order the following statements as they would apply to your moral development. If your development has bounced back and forth between statements, be sure to delineate that movement. Below are definitions of each orientation. These definitions will be referred to throughout the survey. Further note any discrepancies between your moral development and this model.
   a) Universal Ethical principle orientation: right is defined by decisions of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logic comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency.
   b) Social Contract Legalistic orientation: right is a matter of personal values and opinion, resulting in an emphasis upon the possibility of changing law based upon rational considerations of social utility.
   c) Law and Order orientation: from the perspective of a generalized member of society, reasoning relies upon a conception of the social system as a consistent set of codes and procedures that apply impartially to all members in a society.
   d) Good-Boy, Nice-Girl orientation: good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them; conformity to stereotypical images of what is majority or "natural" behavior is a guide.
   e) Instrumental Relativist orientation: interest in satisfying one's own needs is key; elements of fairness, reciprocity, and equal sharing are present, but they are always interpreted in physical or pragmatic way.
   f) Punishment and Obedience orientation: physical consequences of action determine goodness or badness; an avoidance of punishment and unquestioning deference to power are valued.

Statement	Order
Law & Order orientation	
Good-Boy, Nice Girl orientation	
Universal-Ethical Principle orientation	
Social Contract Legalistic orientation	
Instrumental Relativist orientation	
Punishment & Obedience orientation	

*Reminder, for the remainder of the survey please document non-relevance of a particular question.. Additionally, feel free to comment on any particular question that you believe has relevance.

2. As you think about your life and your moral development, what stands out for you? One or two concrete examples. Please specify your age at time of event.
3. Think about early childhood. If you are able to, write about a time (include your age) where you believe that your moral development was oriented toward using punishment and obedience as a guide for your moral actions. Cite an example if possible. Ex. Mom and Dad made me return a piece of candy I stole from the grocery store. I was 6 years old at the time.
4. Think about a time in your life where you were interested in satisfying your own needs. Elements of fairness, reciprocity, and equal sharing were present . If there was such a time for you, please provide one example and your age during the experience. Ex. You were supposed to share a candy-bar with your brother but you didn't. You were 13 years old. (You had the ability to share but you were interested in satisfying your own needs) Of course, the example you provide should be something that stands out for you in your moral development.
5. Describe a time in which you were guided by a "good boy, nice girl" orientation toward morality, justice, and right or wrong. Please assign your age during which this orientation was exhibited. Ex. You believed that it nice girls do not kiss on first dates. It was wrong. You were 15 years old.
6. Depict a time in life where your moral reasoning relied on a conception of the social system as a consistent set of codes and procedures that apply impartially to all members in a society. Ex. You

became to believe that it is wrong to lie, cheat, or steal under any circumstances because the law says so. You were 17 years old. Does this fit with your moral development?

7. Was there a time in your life where your moral development was based on conceptualizing right as a matter of personal values and opinion resulting in an emphasis upon the possibility of changing law based on rational considerations of social utility? If so, please briefly describe one example.
8. Demonstrate a time in your moral development where you believed right is defined by decisions of conscience, in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency.
9. Briefly describe impact of your parents on your moral development.
10. Have significant others impacted your moral development?
11. Has there been an institution (ex. USMA, military, church) that has impacted your moral development? Briefly describe. (Ex. Catholic church – religious teachings).
12. How do you currently attend to moral decision-making?
13. Has your moral development been linear – progressing in stages equivalent to ages; or circular – there has been chaotic progression of moral thought?